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@ JIM CARROLL

Companies need to get a grip on e-support

BY JIM CARROLL

You've just launched a brilliant marketing campaign, one that is worthy of many an award. You've convinced me that you have a good product. I want to do business with you!

But first, being the Internet-empowered consumer that I am, I'm eager to ask a few questions, so I visit the Web site mentioned in your ad. I quickly locate the feedback section, peck away at my keyboard, and sit back to wait for your response.

I never hear from you again.

Sadly, this scenario continues to be all too typical, as survey after survey shows that at least half of all companies, large and small, still fail to respond to customer e-mail within a reasonable period of time–if they bother to answer at all. Quite simply, most companies continue to fail miserably at the process of managing their customer relationships, and don't appreciate that, over time, this will have a negative impact on their opportunities for ongoing success.

Ten years ago, the world of marketing was a nice, simple one. You ran a campaign, observed the results and marched on to bigger and better things. Of course, that was in the days of the passive customer. Most of us sat back and never bothered to contact you, since it was such a pain to write a letter, address an envelope and post it. You didn't have a toll-free number or Web site to deal with, and customer interaction was a quaint concept reserved for those theoretical marketing types. Customer support? What a joke! After all, no support was being demanded of you.

Today, however, things are very different. Think about the transformation that has occurred with the typical customer, who has been transformed into a digital activist. They constantly seek interaction with you and continually compare you against your competitors in this regard. They can switch their allegiance on a whim by finding alternative products and sources of supply in but a few mouse clicks. If they feel they've been slighted, heck, they might go off and launch a Web-based cyber-campaign against you.

And, here's the rub. Many of you have yet to realize that your marketing campaign isn't worth a damn if you fail at the job of interactivity, particularly in the area of customer support. If you can't even handle the most rudimentary of online customer support tasks, answering a simple e-mail query, you are destroying whatever chance your message might have had in succeeding. The new empowered customer expects–no, demands–responsiveness.

Need proof? The future potential for success with your marketing campaign can be found within the discount stock brokerage industry. Many organizations, major banks included, were forced to suspend their marketing campaigns, simply because they were failing miserably at the job of providing good customer support. Existing customers, who couldn't get an answer to an e-mail, became apoplectic when they saw those same companies running ads seeking new customers. Shut down the damn ads now, they screamed!

That's where you may soon find your business. I've come to believe that there now exists a direct correlation between the success of your marketing campaign and your ability to provide effective customer support. Fail at the latter, and there's a good chance that you'll fail at the former.

Admit this fact: you've got a big problem, and it's about time that you fixed it.

Might it not also be a good time to take a look under the hood of your Web strategy, determine where you are failing and fix these problems during the slow, lazy, hazy days of summer while most of your customers are busy doing something else?

First, you should realize–or perhaps have senior management finally comprehend–that online customer support is not something that can be done on a shoestring. I'd hazard a guess that many executives felt a sense of horror when they read a recent *Globe & Mail* article noting that Chapters Online has at least 85 people dedicated to answering customer e-mail. Yet if that is what it takes, then it must be done. The new digital customer is too fickle and demanding to expect anything less. You've got to be prepared to spend big money. If you don't, your efforts will be but a joke.

Second, you've got to work harder at integrating all your support activities. Customer support doesn't end with the job of answering the e-mail. Looming on the horizon is customer relationship management software, integrated programs designed to help you manage, streamline and organize all your customer interaction, whether it comes from the Web, toll-free numbers, faxes or other channels. Such programs are complex, expensive and difficult to implement–and will soon be a necessity.

Third, realize that customer support is but one aspect of how you will deal with the customer. Add to this support challenge the world of integrated supply chains and B-2-B networking where customers are demanding more than simple interaction. They want to be able to link directly to your transaction systems, in order to inquire into inventory, generate a purchase order and determine the status of their account. If you can't keep up with the demands of e-mail, how are you going to become the integrated organization that will be typical 10 years from now?

Finally, you've got to deal with the political and management challenges of building an effective customer support organization. You might find there are 10 or 20 customer contact areas within your organization, each of which might view any effort to introduce an integrated solution as a political threat to their power. Not only do you have to spend lots of money to do things right, but you'll have to manage a lot of turf battles.

The reality is, if companies can't even answer their e-mail, they are barely up to the task of becoming participants in the wired economy of the 21st century. So isn't it a good time to take a look at where you are, and think about where your company is going, during summer's little bit of down time?

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